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SUBJECT: AFGHAN MEDIA, OFFICIALS PRAISE NEW U.S. STRATEGY

¶1. Summary: Afghan media coverage of the new U.S. Afghan-Pak strategy has been uniformly very positive, and even typically anti-government newspapers and TV channels have been optimistic in their initial coverage. Criticism has been limited to calling for additions to the strategy, such as support for Afghan infrastructure and democracy, rather than critiquing the substance of the plan. Media leaders note that Afghans will be following implementation of the plan closely. President Karzai strongly supported the strategy at his March 28 press conference.

Afghan Radio Coverage Upbeat

¶2. Coverage on BBC Persian Radio, Radio Killid and Radio Azadi was upbeat. All reports highlighted that the Afghan government has publicly welcomed the strategy. Radio reporting also mentioned that this is the first U.S. strategy released in seven years and that it proves that the Al Qaeda terrorist network's roots are in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. News stories supported the inclusion of Afghanistan's neighbors in the strategy's regional focus. Radio Azadi said that this strategy shows that the U.S. commitment is accountable, and its effectiveness will be measured. Radio Azadi also noted two shortcomings of the strategy: that it does not specifically mention the importance of democratic government in Afghanistan, and does not mention under what conditions aid will be given to Pakistan. Radio Killid reported that "The neighbors of Afghanistan are worried about the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, but the announcement by President Obama that the U.S. will not be in Afghanistan permanently put them at ease." The Killid reporter also argued that increasing troops and equipping the Pakistan army would be less effective than implementing the economic and reconstruction parts of the strategy.

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Editorials: Coordination with Government is Key
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¶3. The two state-run dailies, Hewad (circulation 3,000) and Anis (circulation 12,000), welcomed the strategy and their editorials emphasized that by cooperating with the Afghan government, the new strategy will empower Afghanistan to stand on its own feet. Hewad in a March 28 article noted that, "We hope that the U.S. will implement its strategy in close coordination and cooperation with the Afghan government. The main objective of the strategy should be making Afghanistan economically self-reliant and capable of maintaining better security and ensuring peace and stability."

¶4. Independent newspaper Weesa, (circulation 6,000) reports that a number of Afghan experts believe that the U.S. strategy review directly benefits Afghanistan but that it lacks adequate focus on rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructure. The writer stated that economic growth in Afghanistan will encourage individuals who have joined armed opposition groups to renounce violence and join the peace process. The author added that coordination with the government is needed to ensure successful implementation of the strategy.

¶5. Arman-e- Milli (circulation 4,600) and Hasht-e-sobh (circulation

3,000) newspapers are independent and anti-government, and although their coverage was positive in tone, they each raised some doubts about the strategy. Arman-e-Milli raised questions about implementation, and how aid would be delivered to Pakistan. Hasht-e-sobh's editorial said that the present Afghan government does not have the capacity to implement the strategy.

Media leaders: The Devil is in the Details

¶16. The managing director of Radio Azadi, Amin Madaqiq, said, "So far all reactions both from the press and ordinary people are positive. The only point people make is, whether or not the strategy will be followed in practice and implemented. We all know that people heard a lot of words in the past, they now want to see deeds." Similarly, Salam Watandar Radio News Director Masood Farivar, stated, "So far the reaction has been positive, and the idea itself sounds good, but - the devil is in the details."

¶17. Nasim Fazel, Vice President of Shamsad TV, praised the anti-corruption focus of the strategy and said; "It seems to be a comprehensive strategy which will change the hearts and minds of the people if it is implemented in the way it was drafted." Fazel emphasized that Afghan expectations were high; "Audience members we interviewed were very optimistic about this new strategy, they think it opens a new door to reconciliation, economic growth, security and good governance where all Afghans can live in a more safe and secure manner." Shamsad TV is a primarily Pashto TV station that broadcasts in Kabul, Kandahar and Nangarhar.

Karzai Strongly Support the Strategy

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¶18. At President Hamid Karzai's March 28 press conference he welcomed President Obama's review of strategy on Afghanistan, terming it "realistic" and based on the demands of the Afghan people. President Karzai was widely quoted in news reports as saying that the strategy reflects the will of the Afghan people, and exceeds his expectations. Tolo TV and state-run National TV Afghanistan noted President Hamid Karzai's statement that the strategy covers almost all aspects of success.

¶19. Conclusion: Initial media coverage, in radio, print and broadcast is positive and supportive of the new U.S. strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. Audience expectations are high. The Taliban's assessment of the review has yet to reach the mainstream media, but is likely to follow the negative comments of Mawlawi Wakil Ahmad Motawakkil, former Taleban foreign minister, namely, that the U.S. strategy is a "blow to peace." The common Afghan refrain: a call for close coordination with the Afghan government in implementing the strategy.

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